

A LOOK BACK

Three Voyages of a Naturalist. Being an Account of Many Little-Known Islands in Three Oceans Visited by the "Valhalla" R.Y.S.

By M. J. Nicoll, Member of the British Ornithologists' Union. With an Introduction by The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Crawford, K.T. F.R.S. London, Witherby & Co, 1908.

CHAPTER XX. EASTER ISLAND

Fourteen days after leaving Valparaíso, Easter Island, the "Mystery of the Pacific" was sighted.

Easter Island is 2300 miles west of Chile, and, though it is comparatively well-known by repute on account of the huge images, hewn out of lava, that are to be found in many parts of the island, especially near the sea shore, it has been very seldom visited.

When first discovered by Roggeveen a Dutch captain, on Easter day, 1721 [sic], it was uninhabited,¹ but the island is now used as a sheep and cattle run, and belongs to a Chilean company. During his second voyage Cook estimated the number of inhabitants as 700, but this was evidently an underestimate, as in 1860 they numbered 3000. Three years later the depredations of slavers had reduced the population to one-half, and later an epidemic of measles²

wrought further havoc, so that by 1968 only some 900 inhabitants remained. It 1872 there were only 295, and ten years later only 150, while at the time of our visit the population was not more than 100.

When we arrived the weather was rough, and we were unable to lower a boat, and but for the fact that Lord Crawford had taken the mails from Valparaíso for the inhabitants, we should no doubt have sailed away without landing. For-

tunately, however, the people on shore saw the yacht, and sent a surf-boat out to us, and by this means we were able to go ashore.

We were only there a very short time, and in consequence were unable to see many of the interesting caves and carvings which abound on the island; and this was especially unfortunate, as practically nothing is known of the former inhabitants, while the fauna and flora, such as they are, have never been collected.

There are now, I believe, two Easter Island images in the British Museum. The images, we judged, are on an average at least twenty feet in height, while some of them are probably considerably more. They have been hewn out of the lava in one or more of the craters on the island. In one of the smaller of these craters, Major Wilbrahman saw several statues in an unfinished condition, the features being carved on the surface of the lava. It would seem, therefore, that the outline of the statue was first carved, and that the block of lava was afterwards cut out and carried by some unknown means down to the coast, where it was set upright, facing the sea.³

Apparently all these images are alike in general appearance. The carving is rough; it represents a human face with a very large and prominent nose, a rather protruding mouth, a pointed chin, and forehead narrow, and the brows beetling. (Figures 2 and 3).

Each statue is mounted on a platform of loose blocks of lava, and these platforms seem to be ancient burial-places. All the stone with which the platforms are built are of the size of a man's head, perhaps slightly larger, and they are arranged in the form of

a rough square of about the dimensions of an ordinary dinner-table; in the center of each platform there is a hollow space.

Soon after we landed, one of the party noticed a fragment of a human skull lying near one of the statues, and, on enquiry, we were told that the skull had come from one of the platforms. Our informant added that there were human remains in all the piles of rocks at the foot of the images, and that, if we liked, he would tell the rest of the natives to col-



Figure 1. The R. Y. S. *Valhalla*. Photo courtesy Freshwater and Marine Image Bank, University of Washington Libraries.

¹ Ed.: The author must mean uninhabited by Europeans as there were Rapanui living on the island when Roggeveen landed.

² Ed.: It was smallpox, not measles that spread across the island, with disastrous results.

³ Ed.: The statues faced inland, not out to sea.

lect a quantity of bones for us. This same man – a native of Tahiti,⁴ who had been on Easter Island for several years – told us emphatically that the bones were on the island when the present inhabitants first arrived there from Tahiti.⁵

We, of course, accepted his offer, and, on our return to the landing-place a few hours afterwards, we found a large stack of bones awaiting us. We ourselves examined several of the platforms, and in each one there were remains of human skeletons. Some were complete, and some consisted only of a few small bones, such as vertebrae or ribs. Many of the bones were in good condition, but others much decayed, and showed signs of having lain in these graves for a very great length of time.

So far as we could discover, only one body was buried in each platform. The body seemed to have been placed in its grave in no special position – at least, the bones were all together in a pile, though possibly the body may have been placed in a crouching position, a supposition borne out to a certain extent by the fact that the spaces in the platforms were of no great size.

All the bones collected were carefully packed and taken on board, and are now in the British Museum. Mr. T. A. Joyce has examined this collection and has most kindly placed his notes on the subject at my disposal. I have made several extracts from them and owing to his courtesy am able to give a fuller account of all that is known of this interesting island than would otherwise have been possible. A series of forty-nine skulls was brought from Easter Island by Capt.-Lieutenant Geiseler, after the visit of the German gunboat “Hyäne” to the island. Geiseler obtained several of the skulls himself either from the “platforms” or from specially built mortuary chambers. He stated that the “platforms” were used by the present inhabitants as burial places, and adds that this practice was in vogue at the time of his visit; and that the natives were in the habit of removing the bones as the bodies decayed to make room for further burials, leaving only the skulls. It seems strange, therefore, that the natives should have told us that the bones were there before the island became re-

inhabited; also that we should have found but one skull in each “platform.”

After a careful examination of the skulls brought back by us, Mr. Joyce finds in them distinct evidences of a Melanesian type, and he naturally describes this as a most surprising find in an island so far removed from Melanesia; his words are, “and considering the remoteness of Easter Island from Melanesia of the present day, this fact in itself is sufficiently puzzling and interesting.”

We were informed by the overseer of the island that the present inhabitants were imported from Tahiti,⁶ and if this be the case it is difficult to account for the presence of Melanesian types in the skulls found on the island, unless, indeed, many of these skulls are really those belonging to the former inhabitants.

The huge images set up on a platform of stones, arranged so as to form a covered chamber or vault, seem to point to these having been intended to mark a burial place. In fact, it is difficult to imagine for what other purpose they were erected.

The portions of skulls from which the accompanying photograph was taken are in my possession and are crumbling with age.

Caves were seen and the stone houses examined, during our visit, by Major Wilbraham, who has kindly supplied me with the following short description of them, and the carvings they contain. It is much to be regretted that, owing to the short time available, Major Wilbraham did not have sufficient opportunity to make an even more thorough examination. In company with Doctor Macdonald he spent a night ashore, as guest of the overseer, Mr. Cooper,⁷ and the following are extracts from his journal:—

“March 13th. — Macdonald and I got up early and rode to the top of the crater, which is called on the map Rano Kao. This is perfectly circular, seven hundred feet deep, and two and a half miles round, while the bottom is covered by a marsh. Part of the way down the crater are a series of cliffs each of which has a cave-dwelling entrance, but we had no time to examine these.



Figure 2. Lava images.

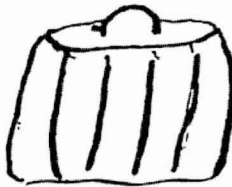


Figure 3. Lava crown for statue.

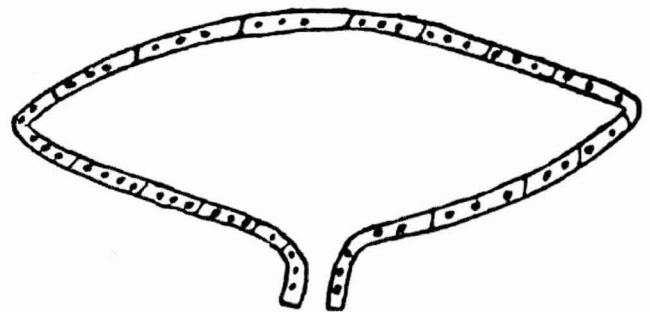


Figure 4. Plan of the stone house on the lip of the crater Rano Kau.

⁴ Ed.: Who was this? Salmon left the island in 1888. The “Tahitian” might have been the brother of Elizabeth Rangitaki (Pakarati’s wife).

⁵ Ed.: Clearly some misunderstanding here: the Rapanui people did not come from Tahiti.

⁶ The present inhabitants are in appearance pure-bred Polynesians and possess the handsome features of the Tahitians.

⁷ Ed.: Mr Horace Cooper came to Rapanui with his wife and two children, replacing Alberto Sanchez. Cooper was replaced in 1904; he was the last of the cruel sheep ranch administrators and is recalled for his harsh treatment of the Rapanui, including forced labor and deportations of trouble-makers (who often were dumped at sea).

"We rode to the south-west or sea-side of the crater, where the lip was broken away into the sea, and looks out on three rocky islets.

"There are just on the lip a number of low stone houses facing the sea. In plan they are narrow ellipses (Figure 4), the walls and roofs being built of shallow, undressed slabs. The doorways are very narrow and low. The floors are clay, but as there is at present only about four feet headroom, they were probably once lower. I found an oval smooth stone, about ten inches long, with a scratched device (Figure 5). The rough boulders outside were covered with



Figure 5. Carved stone.

figures not ungraceful, generally a female form in a curved position, sometimes with a sort of chignon, decorated with two long feathers pointing forwards. This figure was sometimes doubled, and a particularly fine one was inside one of the houses (Figure 6). Odd corners of the rock were filled up with these designs (Figure 7). There was also a block with a rather deeply carved sort of owl's face inside one house. Outside one house were the deep marks of tool grinding.

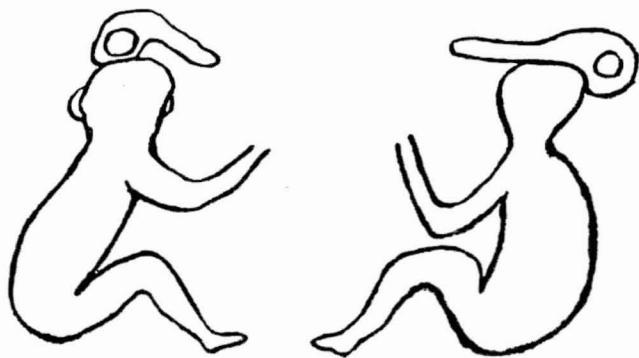


Figure 6. Female figures cut on the boulders.

"Some houses had two entrances on the same side, and sometimes a middle partition. I found no implements, but had no means of digging. I saw a few obsidian chips, and have no doubt there is much to find here.

"Mr. Cooper gave me a broken stone fish-hook and an old wooden idol.

"We rode down to a cave by the sea on the west side, called in the map 'Hangaroa.' There were many paintings in red and white and black, principally frigate birds (Figure 8), and a man-of-war with white portholes, and another square-sailed ship. These do not appear to be of great antiquity.

"In the village I got some rough obsidian spear-heads and a large stone adze.

"Mr. Cooper tells me that there are, in some parts of the island, inscriptions in stone, but we saw none; he describes

them as like 'Japanese writing.'⁸ The more modern idols are of the type of statues, with a broad nose with narrow bridge. The old wooden idol (mentioned above) is quite different, with high cheek bones and a 'Wellington' nose."

There is evidently much of great interest to be found on Easter Island, and it would well repay the trouble and expense



Figure 7. Designs carved in the rock outside the houses at the lip of the crater.

of a thorough investigation; but, if anything is going to be done it must be done soon. Every year makes a great difference to the state of the carvings and caves, as the latter are now much used as shelters for sheep, and in a comparatively short time all traces of any carvings will be worn away by the frequent passing to and fro of these animals.

It would not be so very difficult for an expedition to visit the island, for at least once every month a schooner or a



Figure 8. A painting in a cave of a frigate bird.

small steamer leaves Valparaíso and calls there, and I have no doubt that one could easily reach it by these means.

The whole of my time during our short visit was spent in collection specimens of natural history, and I had no opportunity of visiting the caves and stone houses. Birds and insects were very scarce – in fact, I have never seen an island the size of Easter Island inhabited by so few birds.

There is apparently but one species of indigenous land-bird. This bird I did not meet with, but it was described to me by Dr. Macdonald, who saw a single example near the settlement, as being somewhat like a reed-bunting but with a red breast. I believe this to be an un-described species, and it is unfortunate that no specimen was procured.

There is a tinamou, a bird much resembling a partridge, but this has been introduced from South America. Two of these birds, which were shot and skinned, proved to belong to a common species of tinamou, known as *Nothoprocta perdicaria*. Sea-birds were rather more numerous, but these were mostly seen from the ship before we landed. On the island itself I saw but two species, the common noddy tern, the same bird as that found on Saint Paul's Rocks, and white terns.⁹

⁸ The Easter Islanders alone of all the inhabitants of Oceania [sic] and South America possessed a written language. Wooden tablets, on which the script has survived, are described by Mr. O. M. Dalton, cf. "Man," 1904.

⁹ Ed.: *Gygis alba*.

The latter were seen in the crater of Rano Kao, where they were apparently nesting.

In a marsh at the bottom of the crater were numbers of small geese, which were seen both by myself and Major Wilbraham. These geese may have been introduced, but as none

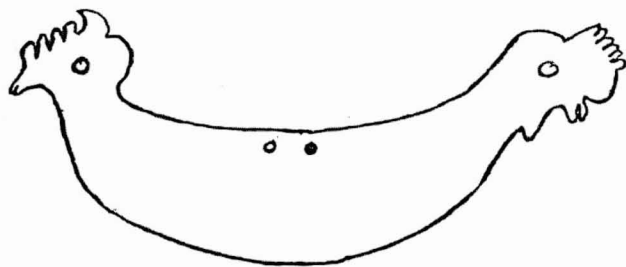


Figure 9. Wooden "charm." Worn, perhaps, on the heart.

of us had time to get to the bottom of the crater, no specimens were procured. In coloration they appeared to belong to two species; some being black with a patch of white on the wing, while others were of a red colour. These difference may, however, be due to sex. A golden plover was, we were told, introduced by Mr. Cooper, who, several years ago, turned out six of these birds on the island.

There are no indigenous mammals on Easter Island, the rat which inhabits it having been imported, and a cat, which is found wild, being descended from the domestic cat.

On the second day of our visit I landed early in the morning, and set off in the direction of the crater. After a long walk I eventually reached the lip of this volcano, but, owing to lack of time, I was unable to get to the marsh at the bottom of it. I scrambled about half-way down to pick up a tern which I had shot, but at this point it was extremely difficult to descend, owing to the nature of the ground, which was covered with loose stones and *débris*. I obtained a glimpse of the geese, and had a good view of the marsh about a thousand feet below me.

Easter Island is now almost entirely covered with grass, and, from the sea, presents an unbroken view of rolling grass-covered country. A closer inspection shows that amongst the grass lie innumerable rocks of lava of various sizes, and were it not for the number of sheep-tracks in all directions, it would be a tedious matter to walk any distance in many parts of the island.

A few low trees have been planted amongst the houses at the settlement, and at the bottom of the crater I noticed some small trees and bushes. In former times there were

many trees, but all appear to have been felled, and the land cleared to make grazing ground for sheep and cattle.

At the time of our visit there were 40,000 sheep. They were very small, and their wool was of a yellowish colour, doubtless discoloured by the earth. All the wool is shipped to Valparaíso, whence it goes to Bradford, in Yorkshire.

Two sheep and a bullock were required for the ship, and we watched the natives catching them. The sheep were easily ridden down by a couple of men on horseback, and were at once slaughtered.

A bullock was then singled out and separated from the herd by the two mounted natives. Each man was armed with a strong lasso made of raw hide, the end of which was fastened to the saddle of his horse. As soon as the bullock was cut off from its companions it was headed for the shore. Driven frantic by the cries of its pursuers it charged straight for us, and we had barely time to scramble out of the way before it was galloping over the spot where we had been sitting. Then brought to a standstill by a low cliff, it was most skillfully lassoed by one of the horsemen, who, from a distance of some twenty yards, threw his thong in such a way that the running noose fell over the horns of the bullock and at once drew tight. The second native then cast his lasso over the beast's hindquarters, the lower end of the loop lying on the grass just behind its hind feet. The other native then rode to the front making the bullock step backwards and thus stand within the circle of the lasso which was at once pulled tight, so that the poor beast fell heavily to the ground. It was then dispatched by a knife thrust in the throat.

I was indeed sorry when we sailed away from Easter Island after so short a stay. I had been able to only spend some six hours on shore, and the greater part of that time was taken up in walking from the landing-place to the crater, a distance of something over three miles along an exceedingly rough track.

In a voyage of this kind, however, it is impossible to do so much as was originally intended, owing to delays which are always experienced in ports. For instance, we were delayed for various reasons in Bahia for two weeks, and the same length of time in Valparaíso, where the ship was dry-docked, owing to an injury to the propeller, sustained while steaming through the ice in Smythe's Channel.

In such ways as these, days were lost in places of little interest compared to that of Easter Island and Pitcairn. The whole of this voyage occupied nine months only, and so we were forced to be content with extremely short stays at many of the islands, while visits to other, such as South Trinidad and the Marquesas, had to be abandoned altogether. ❖